**SOCIOCULTURAL ERQ EXAMPLE:**

**Describe the role of situational and dispositional factors in explaining behaviour.**

Both disposition and situation determine one’s behaviour. However, far too often dispositional factors are used to explain behaviour when the situation can play a more powerful role.

Asch’s (1951) study demonstrates how the situation plays a powerful role in determining behaviour. His aim was to investigate if people would conform in a non-ambiguous situation. To achieve this, he deceived participants into thinking they were taking part in a visual perception study and asked them to complete a simple task of matching lines. He had two conditions: the control condition consisted of participants completing the task on their own while the treatment condition involved the participant sitting sit in a group with six other confederates who purposely answered 12 out of the 18 trials incorrectly. The participant would have to answer aloud after hearing everyone’s response. The findings were that when alone, participants were nearly always correct while 76% of the participants in the treatment condition answered incorrectly on at least one critical trial. By such a high percentage of people conforming to a wrong answer on such a simple task, it showed that the situation plays a powerful role in determining behaviour. In addition, due to having a control and treatment condition to compare, it was clear that the presence of others (ie. the situation) was what had caused conformity to the wrong answers. However, confounding variables may apply as the sample may have consisted of many insecure individuals who were more willing to conform. Also confounding variables such as age and gender may have played a part as it is possible that younger participants would’ve been more willing to conform, especially when grouped with confederates of the same gender. Though not a perfect study, the study shows that the situation has a powerful effect on behaviour.

Another study that demonstrates the power of the situation is Milgram’s (1963) study investigating to what degree people will obey an authority figure. Milgram had recruited 40 male participants around the age of 25-40 and each participant was paired with a confederate who pretended to be another participant. The participant was always picked as a “teacher” while the confederate was always the “learner”. The participant was instructed to shock the “learner” for every wrong answer from an escalating range of 15 volts (mild shock) to 450 volts (lethal shock). The confederate purposely gave wrong answers and if the participant refused to shock the confederate, then the experimenter would state 4 scripted prods to encourage the participant. The findings were that 65% of the participants administered a 450 volt shock. The findings imply that situational, more than dispositional factors play a huge part in behaviour as more than half of the participants succumbed to the experiment’s demands. Although some people by disposition may be more inclined to obey authority figures, the high percentage of participants who administered a deadly shock make it unlikely that the majority of participants were influenced by dispositional factors. However, demand characteristics may have affected the participants’ behaviour as they may have only given the most severe shock from guessing that that aim of the study was to see how far they would go. In this sense the ecological validity is low as outside of the lab setting one is rarely encountered with an authority figure ordering one to hurt someone else. However, despite its flaws, this study’s findings reveal that situational factors have a powerful role in determining behaviour.

Finally, Darley and Latane’s study show that the situation more than the disposition has an effect on human behaviour. Their study was to investigate if people would conform to bystanderism even at the risk of their own safety. They achieved this aim by having participants fill out a questionnaire in a room where smoke began to seep into the room under the door. They had three groups of participants fill out a questionnaire alone (control condition), with two other participants (1st treatment condition), and with two other passive confederates (2nd treatment condition). The findings were that when by themselves, 75% of the participants went to go report the smoke, while small groups of participants reported the smoke 38% of the time, and the 2nd treatment group reported 10% of the time. The findings imply that situational factors play a powerful role in determining behaviour as comparing the three different conditions makes it apparent that it was the presence and behaviour of others that drastically changed the participants’ behaviour. By having the three different conditions, the study had great face validity as a cause and effect relationship was easily seen. The study had great ecological validity as well as it created a realistic scenario that could happen in everyday life. However, the participants may have been able to guess that the smoke was part of the experiment and therefore didn’t react in the latter two conditions due to demand characteristics. However, despite such weaknesses, the study does show the power of the situation.

The power of the situation in determining behaviour is not a force that should be easily dismissed. Though we cannot help being influenced by the situation, just the awareness of the situation’s power may change how much we are affected by it.